1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 . AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE LIFE OF KURMA

i

When I went to investigate the Lepchas one of the chief objects that I set myself was the collection, if it should prove possible, of the life history of one or more individuals. This seemed to me desirable for a number of reasons. It should be axiomatic that all sociology is based on the dialectical opposites of the society and the individual, and that any study which neglects either pole is thereby incomplete. Unfortunately, owing to the elaboration and specialisation of the distinct disciplines there has been very little contact between the psychologist studying the individual and the sociologist and anthropologist studying the group; the psychologist tends to treat the individual as though he lived in a vacuum, shared perhaps by his parents and immediate family, and they act as though the particular society of which the individual is a member were 'human nature' or 'natural circumstances'; they tend to ignore almost completely the cultural conditioning to which the individual, as a member of his society, has inevitably been subjected.[1] The sociologist and anthropologist on the other hand tend to ignore the individual as such, though they naturally pay attention to the special social functions of certain individuals placed by the society in conspicuous positions. Apart from these individuals of outstanding position, the mass of the population is classified into groups, usually according to one single aspect of the individual—their economic position, their religious beliefs, their type of work, their

[1] A notable exception must be made for the work of Dr. Margaret Mead and that of Dr. John Dollard of the Institute of Human Relations of Yale University. His two books—*Criteria for the Life History* and *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*—combine very significantly the study of the individual and his society. I should like to reiterate my very great debt to Dr. Dollard, for it was through his books and conversation that my attention was focussed on this particular problem.

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

● 121 age or sex, and various other criteria. The working of the society is, as it were, studied from above and as objectively as possible. This non-participating attitude is undoubtedly necessary to get a complete view of the society in all its functions and ramifications; but if the study stops there it is impossible to interpret from such data the effect which the organisations studied have on the individuals who have to work them. We may learn a great deal about a given culture without having any estimate as to the results this culture has on its component parts, or the subjective importance of these parts to the individual. To give an over-simple example, any study of English life would have to devote considerable space to the very elaborate organisation and beliefs of the Church of England; it might also notice, though naturally more briefly, the value placed on a dirt-free epidermis and correctly buttoned garments. But no objective view could show how many people would prefer the close company of a professed atheist to a person who had patently not washed in the last fortnight, or whether an individual would be more discomfited by missing evensong or by entering a crowded room with all his trouser buttons undone. A good deal of interpretation is possible, especially in small communities, by intelligent observation and deduction, but such interpretation, however carefully documented, can always be suspected of misplaced emphasis and perhaps personal bias.[2] These objections inevitably disappear in an avowedly subjective autobiography of a member of the society. The individual telling his own story may be an exceptional one, but the emphasis and stresses are untouched by the preoccupations of the ethnographer.

A second advantage of the life history is that it is liable to give information on points which would otherwise be inevitably unobservable. Thus among the Lepchas it would be quite impossible for any stranger to observe the almost constant nagging in which women seem to indulge in the privacy of the family, for such nagging is immediately stopped in the presence of any stranger. I should have considered the women as apparently peaceful and contented as the men, did not this family nagging recur so frequently in people's autobiographies. Similarly the psychological importance

[2] It may be considered that I have exaggerated the use of the first person singular in this book. I think it preferable to allow my own bias to show openly and thereby be accounted for, than to pretend to the inevitably unobtainable attitude of Olympian objectivity. The ethnographer is as much part of the society he is studying (albeit only temporarily) as any other member.

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

of food would be almost impossible to estimate, if it were not for the fact that it is the central theme of so many individual memories. One of the chief justifications of the collection of life histories is given by the experience of my friend Mr. R. F. Barton,[3] who, on his third visit to the Ifugao, discovered through a life history a group of family gods with special observances of whose existence fifteen years life among the Ifugao with two long periods of objective investigation had given him no clue.

A third advantage of the life history, to my mind—though this point is of less immediate impact on sociology—is that it is a valuable corrective. There is at present a very obvious tendency in political and sociological thinking to ignore the individual in favour of his political or social functions; this dehumanising of social thought seems to me not only undesirable but also extremely dangerous; a great deal of the misery and distress in the contemporary scene appears to me to derive directly from the habit of thinking of people in groups instead of as individuals.

ii

Since I wished if possible to collect a life history, and since for various personal reasons my stay outside Europe could not be overlong, I was very lucky in finding in the Lepchas a society with a relatively unelaborated culture (outside the sphere of religion), and moreover one which was in no way fractionalised and of which no portion was guarded as a secret from the rest of the community. The energy which in other societies might have had to be directed to the discovery of magic or secret rites and initiations I was able to divert to the establishment of personal contacts. Moreover my preliminary study of the language in British India had given me a working knowledge of most of the formal arrangements of the society, such as the kinship terms and marriage arrangements, so that after the first month I was able to devote a considerable amount of my time to the non-formalised aspects of the culture and to try to get life histories.

Now to learn the story of another's life it is obviously necessary that the person who is telling his story should tell it willingly and have confidence in his listener; otherwise you will inevitably get lies and evasions. Here, too, I was served by the Lepchas' tendency

[3] Author of *Ifugao Law and Customs*, *The Rising Sun*, etc.

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

quality; for if the existence of internal competition is a necessary preliminary to conquest (and it would seem inevitable that this must be so: aggressive wars can only be waged for extra booty or prestige on the part of individuals before the existence of the state) then the absence of internal competition is dysgenic as soon as the group which discourages it comes into contact with an aggressive group. As far as groups are concerned the process of civilisation could be described as a constant selection in favour of aggressiveness. Up till now aggressiveness has had a very definite survival value; so in their time did the mammoth's or the sabre-toothed tiger's tusks.

121 It may be argued that the Lepchas did not themselves develop feudalism because they have been conquered and are now the subordinate part of a feudal state; but that is no explanation of the fact that they have developed no form of organisation which would possibly be capable of developing into feudalism. Their neighbours the Nepali appear to have lived under the dominion of foreign (and therefore invading) kings from China and India for nearly two thousand years; in the early eighteenth century the Gurkhas nevertheless developed a complete feudal state.

So far have the Lepchas been from developing towards feudalism that there is no sort of native tradition of any historical or heroic chief; their biggest unit seems always to have been the village (or *ptso*—extended family group—if the *ptso* was, as seems possible, at one time a geographical unit) and one of the greatest weaknesses of their existing social organisation is the very limited power of control which the Mandal of one village can exercise over inhabitants of other villages.[5]

If my argument has been correct, the reason why the Lepchas never developed towards feudalism despite apparently adequate predisposing material conditions was that they did not sufficiently develop within their society competition and aggression. It is

society as a unit. By analogy I am comparing societies with animal species, but I do not wish to suggest that in any way their survival or disappearance is genetically determined. It is obvious that a conquered people, though they lose their specific culture, may be more fertile than their conquerors, and so from a biological viewpoint conquest may be eugenic.

[5] A case in point is the destitution of Kurma's mother after the death of her first husband, when the Mandal and people of Lingthem were unable to force the 'husband's younger brother', who should have inherited and supported her, to marry her because he lived under another Mandal. See Chapter Fifteen, pp. 388 and 394.

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

necessary for some portion of a society to wish for power and distinction, for property and prestige, if the whole society is to develop a more elaborate form, feudalism. Engels and Morgan appear to have believed either that the transformation was an automatic ('historical' is their favourite synonym) process developing spontaneously from the change in the productive power of labour, or else that mankind was 'naturally' acquisitive and competitive. But feudalism means an increase in the size of the social group, and that increase can only, in the long run, be accomplished at the expense of other groups. Social evolution and the survival of certain groups is dependent, ultimately, on the amount of permissive internal competition and aggression; if the permissive aggression is excessive the society will be liable to fissurate and split into a number of internecine groups, incapable of combination; if it is defective the society will have no pattern for resisting alien intrusion. Save in the exceptional case when a materially primitive society comes into conflict with a materially advanced one social evolution is selective in favour of societies with an optimum number of aggressive individuals.

iv

One of the most futile and popular subjects of discussion is the nature and characteristics of the 'natural' man; in the course of two centuries philosophers and polemists have endowed this unfortunate abstraction with every sort of contradictory quality, according to the point which they wished to make. The subject is futile, for it is impossible to conceive man apart from some sort of society, no matter how small and undeveloped; as an animal man is born with certain biological urges and appetites, but the expression which these urges and appetites will assume is to a very great extent socially determined. As an animal man has to feed himself and to reproduce himself; what food he will eat and what mate he will get will be to a very great extent determined by the society of which he is a member.

It has seemed worth while to repeat this truism because the question of aggression, and especially the social control of aggression, is one which has been singularly neglected both by psychologists and sociologists. One of the reasons for this neglect is probably the fact that all the writers on such subjects were members of states, and one of the chief laws of any state is that the social control of aggression is the business of the state, and not of the

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

offensive and defensive warfare; whether they develop this form of social behaviour would appear to depend to a great extent on the density of population in a given area. When agriculture has developed so far that one man's labour can produce sufficient food for more than the labourer (and his immediate dependents) slave-raiding becomes an economic proposition.

So far we have been considering aggression in its purely destructive aspect of fighting, competition and destruction. But I think that is far too narrow a definition of the term and that destruction and rivalry are only two of the aspects of aggression. I should like to suggest that aggression should be defined as one aspect of *the urge to obtain mastery over the environment*; this urge is universal, but the strength with which it is manifested depends on the individual temperament, and the forms its overt expression takes depend partly on the material circumstances and partly on the social organisation in which the individual is born. Aggression or mastery can be manifested towards objects and ideas (the supernatural, for example) as well as towards people, and it can be constructive or destructive; there is as much release of aggression in building or creating as in destroying.

121 152 With this wider definition of aggression Sumner's hypothesis that each society (or rather the individuals composing it) have to externalise a certain amount of aggression takes on an added validity; but his 'other-groups' must be redefined to mean the external world and the supernatural, and not merely members of other societies. I should like to suggest the generalisation that the amount of destructive aggression manifested towards other men in primtiive societies is negatively correlated with the difficulty of maintaining life in the given physical environment or social organisation. In other words the harder the environment and the less material development there is, the less will destructive aggression be overtly manifested. Socially allowed destructive aggression is the product of economic security and leisure. If I am correct in this statement the type picture of the earliest men as uninhibitedly destructive and jealous until they were made tolerant, will have to be changed to that of hard-working and generally socially unaggressive men developing jealousy and fighting as they acquired control over their food supply and the dangerous animals in the environment. If this statement is correct the Lepchas' failure to develop any pattern of external aggression may be considered to have been conditioned by their isolation, their low material development, and the difficulties

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

of wresting a livelihood from their environment. It would seem probable also that the environment has been responsible for keeping the operative social group a small one and in that respect may have been a reinforcing cause of the Lepchas' failure to develop towards feudalism. The small local and kinship group is now firmly implanted in Lepcha culture and it is interesting to note how, under contemporary settled conditions, the Lepchas still oppose all attempts to weld them into bigger units; their treatment of the new office of Muktair,[8] even though it was created by the powerful Court, is extremely illuminating.

V

The reasons given above for the Lepchas' lack of destructive aggression outside their group may be adequate; the lack of aggression inside the group cannot be explained in such general terms. It is possible that since, in their major occupation of getting food, the Lepchas felt themselves more opposed by natural phenomena (personified into supernatural forces) than by other men, they to a certain extent carried the same attitude into their social life and regarded the supernatural, and not their fellows, as their chief cause for discontent. From the common-sense point of view it could be argued, as Sumner suggests, that in the small groups of which Lepcha society was composed the value of each individual worker was so great to the group as a whole that all potentially aggressive situations whereby the group might be threatened with the loss of the worker had to be avoided. Unfortunately it cannot be assumed of any human group that they act on common-sense reasons.

Though the reasons for the Lepchas' almost complete suppression of destructive aggression within their group would appear to be impossible to discover, it may be worth while noting their methods of doing so. This suppression of aggression can be viewed from two aspects: there are the social rules for its control, and there is the treatment of the new recruits to the society, the babies. From the social point of view, the most obvious is their strong social sanction against quarrelling; the Lepchas have not admitted a single situation in which quarrelling or vengeance-seeking is permissible. This may be regarded as a legal sanction against quarrelling. Next in importance from the legal point of view is the social arrangement of all sexual relationships so as to exclude jealousy. These arrangements have been detailed in Chapter Six but

[8] See Chapter Five, pp. 123–126.

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

121 152 may be briefly recapitulated. Parents have no rôle in the sexual life of their children; exclusive sexual possession is legally impossible; the younger are favoured against the elder (since they have access to their elders' spouses) and the elder are prevented from overbearing the younger by the equation of 'younger siblings'' spouses with children-in-law. Although nowadays not fully employed they have the legal device of repairing unsatisfactory marriages without the enmity of the two groups involved by exchanging the unsatisfactory spouse for another member of the same group.

In the Lepcha treatment of young children there seem to me to be two constant stresses of almost equal importance for the avoidance of overt aggression. One of these stresses has been already fully documented in Chapter Eleven; it is the immediate and willing satisfaction of all the infant's expressed physical desires. Save under exceptional circumstances, or through illness, the Lepcha infant does not apparently suffer to any appreciable extent from hunger, discomfort or cold. From the point of view of physical well-being Lepcha babies appear to experience the minimum of frustration and therefore it would seem that in the first months of life there are few experiences to evoke aggression. But parallel with this gratification of physiological appetites there is the considerable physical restraint which the babies endure through passing the majority of their waking hours firmly tied to the back of their guardian, and also the complete lack of encouragement which their elders give to the babies' earlier self-maximating activities and attempts to acquire body techniques and physical independence. Young babies get no social approval from their attempts to crawl and walk; on the contrary a mobile baby is more likely to be picked up and replaced on its guardian's back, since it is there easier to control. The two methods by which babies in our society would appear to win adult approval in their second year are successful sphincter control and the acquirement of body techniques and speech. Sphincter control is paid little attention to by adult Lepchas until a considerably later age, and attempts at acquiring body techniques are met with, at the best, indifference. Very young the Lepcha baby learns that social approval is to be obtained, not by self-assertion, but by passivity. The baby's self-maximating efforts are not actively punished, but they are discouraged by indifference; its passivity and conformity are constantly rewarded.

I think it is legitimate to trace a connection between this partial extinction of self-assertion in early childhood and the adult Lepcha's

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

tendency to judge their fellows in their rôle of members of society, and not as personalities. This impersonal attitude to their fellows seems to me the chief operative factor for the suppression of competition and aggression in adult life. The Lepchas stress constantly social behaviour and minimise individual character variations. They stress the resemblance between individuals, they minimise their differences. This constant stress on the resemblance of individuals obviously makes for a low development of the ego, a lack of internal competition, a lack of contrast. The Lepchas minimise the most obvious contrasts, between rich and poor, between men and women, between lamas and illiterate laymen, to a great extent between adults and children. They recognise no social goals which can only be achieved at the expense of others, they have no social situations which separate rights and duties.

Although, as I have shown, this lack of personal aggression is dysgenic in the Lepchas' state of social development, the excess of personal and national aggression appears to be equally dysgenic in our own state of social development. To minimise this aggression will it be necessary for us too to view our neighbours impersonally, to tone down all the contrasts in personality, talent and achievement which have resulted in the greatest glories as well as the greatest horrors of our society? Or is there another solution?

[p. 452 is blank]

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

age and was taught to believe that a measure of self-discipline was good for the soul. We never had a quarrel, but doubtless got on one another's nerves from time to time. In view of the fact that our life in Sikkim alternated between intense hard work and complete but unavoidable boredom this was almost inevitable.

These personal details would normally be of no interest to anyone but our own selves. I have inserted them here, however, because, to me at least, it seems important in reading a description of a foreign culture to know how the writer fits into his own. It is almost impossible (and would be extremely dull) to describe the customs of a people entirely objectively; and so it follows that my description of Lepcha home life is inevitably coloured, and possibly limited, by my own outlook. I have concentrated on the things that interested me. Fortunately for us both, Geoffrey was interested mostly in other aspects and is writing a psychological study of the people from the Freudian and Marxist points of view. Our two books, therefore, while dealing (more or less) with the same subject, will have little in common; and in addition I have drawn on my notes and memories of previous journeys in Sikkim, Nepal and Tibet.

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* ethnography is the "scientific description of races of men." I can make no such claim for the following account, which, although the work was carried out under the auspices of the William Wyse Foundation (University of Cambridge), which awarded me its studentship in Social Anthropology, pretends to be no more than a plain unvarnished description of some four months' residence in a Lepcha village. It is not intended for experts and assumes no previous knowledge. The "scientific description" of the culture as a whole, in which we hope to collaborate, may possibly follow later, but will not be ready for some considerable time.

* * * * *

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

in Tibet also, the Mongoloids are farmers. In the regions of North-West China, in Tsing-hai and Kan-su, we found that in many Chinese, living there, the Mongoloid element was completely lacking or present in a very negligible manner. These people are also of a larger build ; they have the long, high-bridged noses, the long narrow faces and in many cases the Mongolian fold is not to be found. One might object that this was due to the influence of non-Mongoloid peoples like the Tibetans and the Turks who repeatedly overran these districts and ruled over the people for long periods of time. We shall refer later to the Mongoloids in China. At this stage it can be said that in China, the pure Mongoloids came from the farming inhabitants in Eastern and Central China as we have proved in the first chapter. One cannot quote the Mongols as counter evidence, as they are a very mixed and younger culture with strong agricultural influences.

We shall not deal in a detailed manner with the customs and habits of the Lepchas at birth, betrothal, marriage, death and burial. There is only one more point which I should like to touch upon : the judging of the Lepchas through the descriptions of European authors like Gorer and C.J. Morris. The two authors describe these people as being dominated by a strong, a very strong, sex complex. J. H. Hutton remarks in his foreword to Gorer's book, "Another aspect of Lepcha life which is almost as striking as the absence of aggression, is the apparent obsession of the whole community with sex. I was tempted to suppose that the author of this book had overemphasised the Lepchas' attitude to sex through an unconscious dramatisation, a journalistic dramatisation, if I may call it so, of a want of reticence on sexual matters of all kinds in a degree quite unfamiliar in his own society. The perusal, however, of Mr. Morris's book shows that I did Mr. Gorer an injustice. At the same time I am rather inclined to feel that the apparent preoccupation of the Lepchas with sex does not necessarily imply that the importance attached to it by them in their lives is proportionately theatrical. One is inclined to wonder whether this consciousness of sex is the cause or the result of the Lepchas' declining population, a decline of which the Lepchas are acutely aware. Probably, if there is any such connection at all it is by now a vicious